

chicagotribune.com

A challenge unmet

Students with emotional or learning disabilities are entitled to an education. But in Chicago, they often miss weeks of school, more than other children

By [David Jackson](#) and [Gary Marx](#), Chicago Tribune reporters

1:15 AM CST, November 13, 2012

Chicago elementary school students with learning or emotional disabilities miss far more school days than their peers without disabilities, the Tribune found in an analysis of internal attendance data from the district.

advertisement

These missed days undermine the education of an already-vulnerable population.

Consider the students in grades K-8 whose designated primary diagnosis is a learning disability — a disorder generally affecting the ability to use or understand language. On average, each of these 17,000 students racked up two weeks of truancy and excused absences in the 2010-11 school year. That's about 20 percent more than those with no disability.

Also frequently gone from school were the 1,500 elementary students with a primary diagnosis of an emotional disorder — children whose behavior or feelings impede their learning and ability to get along with others.

On average, students in grades K-8 with an emotional disorder missed four weeks of school to truancy and other absences. They also accrued 10 times as many suspension days as children without a disability, the Tribune's analysis found.

Federal law requires schools to provide these students with counselors, aides and other support to help them succeed, and it specifically protects them from being excluded from school through excessive suspensions or informal push-outs.

But in Chicago, advocates for the disabled say, many children with learning and emotional disabilities go undiagnosed for too long and are then given inadequate assistance. Alienated from classrooms they find humiliating and unrewarding, youth tend to tune out or lash out, leading to suspensions and other missed days.

One school report for a student with a learning disability showed that "an intervention for minor infractions has

been for her mother to bring or keep (the girl) home with her in order to avoid further escalation of (the girl's) anger and behavior."

That intervention — which advocates for the disabled called a potential violation of federal law — "has resulted in poor exposure to the general education curriculum," the report noted.

Chicago Public Schools officials denied that the intervention was intended to keep the child at home in violation of school policies or the law.

While not commenting specifically on any Chicago cases, Harvard University education professor Thomas Hehir said excessive suspensions and informal exclusions from school are a nationwide problem for youth with disabilities.

"Once you get into that pattern, the implicit message you're giving the child is that school is not important, you don't need to be here," Hehir said. "It becomes a vicious circle."

Students with learning and emotional disabilities "are kids who have a lot of potential," Hehir added. "It's a myth that they can't be highly successful in school, if given the appropriate supports."

Read the full story, "[A challenge unmet](#)," as a digitalPLUS member. To view videos and photos and for a look at the rest of the series, visit chicagotribune.com/truancy.

Copyright © 2012, [Chicago Tribune](#)